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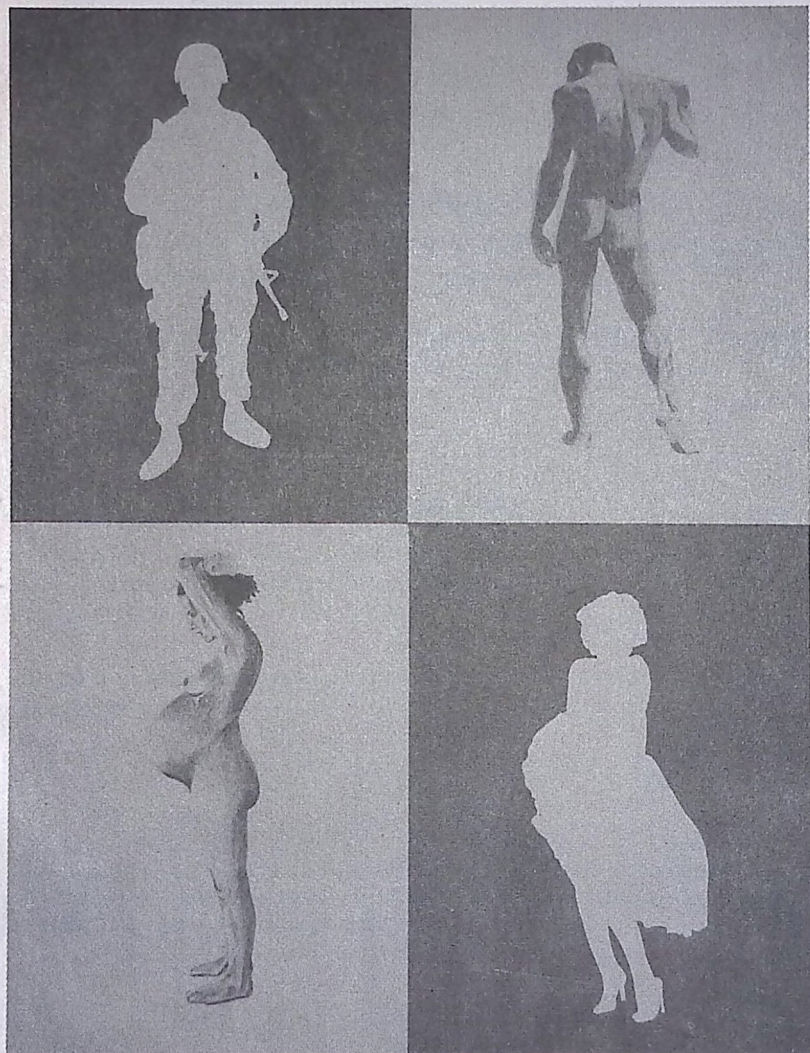
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LITMAG

Poetry Prize Winner
Christina France
p.7

Prose Prize Winner
A.R. Curry
p.13

Wednesday Club
Winner Ryan Krull
p.24



Editors

Public Relations	Michael Frederick, Thomas Manion, Libby Sanders, Tearene Weaver
Publication	Jacob Blanchard, Danielle Fultz, Chris Hauf, Jordan Prott
Production	Garrett Mason, Andrew Seal, Timothy Young
Instructor	Emily Grise

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University of Missouri—St. Louis Community, Mary Troy, English Department, Contributors, Donators, Press Journal, *The Current*, Wednesday Club

About *LitMag*

English 4895: Editing *LitMag*, a course in editing and publishing a student literary magazine, will be offered at University of Missouri—St. Louis in the Spring semester.

Interested students are invited to contact Mary Troy at marytroy@umsl.edu for more information.

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Cover: *Shape Grid* by Ashley Nickell, Art Prize Winner

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Thomas Manion

An Early Lesson

I open the door to
find my nephew
struggling
smothering
a tiny erection.
Eyes wide he says—
I tried to hold it down,
but it was too strong.

This, I reply, will be
a recurring problem.

Butterfly

It was nothing, really
two tiny pieces of tissue
paper
fastened to a paperclip
floating over the grass.

So delicate you could
blow it to pieces
by breathing
too hard.

It caught the air
under its wings,
swirled
higher and higher.

I watched for
a moment,
let grass surge
up under my feet.

Christina France

Poetry Prize Winner

Taos Cinquain

Blooming
cacti flowers
yellow, magenta, she
digs in the desert with a small
shovel.

Two sticks,
string, she wedges
the cross deep into the
sand, a safe distance from the dog's
small corpse.

Sunlight
burns through her eye
lids. Her grandma lifts her
self by pressing hard on the girl's
shoulder.

She sighs,
"When I die, I
want a grave near the road
where I can hear you as you drive
away."

Jennifer Goldring

Only Inches Away

I lost you on the train from Boston to Chicago.
You sidled away into a corner of your mind.

I knew you were gone. I was gone too.
Lost on some old trail in the Appalachians

following a winding path lined with purple lupine.
Our eyes looked through each other and you wouldn't

reach out to touch my lingering fingers.
After that trip, we never could find our way back.



Different Perspective by Maria Di Benedetto

Things Men Say

By Chris Hauf

The restaurant was dimly lit and quiet. The American and the girl sat together in one side of a recessed booth. She sat against the wall, her head resting on it and her eyes closed, and he knotted his brow at her. A waiter picked out two glasses from a full tray and deposited them on the table, then bowed slightly and waited for the man to count out the correct coinage.

"I am not thirsty," the girl said.

"I've already ordered two. You'll like it. She'll like it," the man reassured the waiter.

The girl turned to the man, "I don't want it," and then to the waiter, "I don't want it."

But the man thrust the coins into the waiter's hand and waved him off. "Quit this petulance. I intend to enjoy myself tonight, and I won't indulge your childishness anymore."

She rested her head on the wall and closed her eyes again. The man sniffed, and picked up a menu. Several minutes passed. The waiter returned and left with the man's order, the girl having refused food as well.

"You said that we'd be happy," the girl half-whispered. "You promised. You said things would be like they were."

The man showed no sign of having heard and stared ahead as he swirled the highball in his hand.

The girl stiffened, then said "Let me out. Please. Let me out. I feel ill." She departed to the bathroom, running as soon as she was out of the man's sight. She rushed to the toilet and vomited, heaving violently three or four times. She pulled a handkerchief from her clutch and dabbed the corners of her mouth, straightened her dress and exited.

The man's food had arrived and he was eating steadily. He had finished his drink and had started on hers.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

And You?

I was a baby, then a child, then a man.
Now? Now is complicated.
So simple, though.

I'm not a born again Christian,
I got it right the first time.
Not proud to be an American,
not an achievement of mine.

I'm no longer at war with the Muslims,
outsourcing labor to Chinese children.
I no longer trade blood,
 parents and arms and fingers and feet,
 tears and eyes and lives and love
for diamonds, for oil, for profit.
I removed my boot
from the necks
of trees and beasts.

The trajectories of the cosmos suggest
we were all at one point at one time.
What is there to fear
 when everything out there
 is everything in here?
I walk on boulevards of stars
and travel channels of nebula.
I am from a thousand suns and live
with black holes in my retina.

I see myself not as a man,
no longer live that subjective curse.
I am energy condensed to slow vibration.
I am one with the universe.

For What's-Her-Name

She said her name was Krystal
as she slid her bracelet down my wrist,
and that this was so I wouldn't forget it.

Her eyes were her namesake, though
heavy lidded. Is it poison or passion
that has hatched her abandon?

She spun and danced in a skank-like fashion:
her ass in my crotch, the friction, a fraction
of the heat between us, the chance attraction.

Contact only where none is allowed between
strangers, my hands then found her lumbar,
with her hips grinding hard her only reaction.

She gave me a bracelet. I wrote her a poem.
The only evidence of our lone interaction.
And a question that I can't not think of:
Was it taboo or loneliness that
made me fall in love?



Strut by Jennifer Goldring

Bobby Meile

Save Us, Space Lobster Crab Knight

Defend us from the evil Galaxotyrant
While upholding the virtues of a Crab Knight:
honor, wisdom, strength, and sobriety.
As a lobster, use your claws to cut some bitches,
in defense of those without the power
to cut some bitches themselves.
Do it in space, so there'll be lasers and shit.
Pew Pew!
Pew!
Space Lobster Crab Knight!

(pew)



Nautilus by Marla Di Benedetto

Grumpy Monster

By A.R. Curry

Dillon yawns and stretches and yawns again. He hates afternoon naps and having just awoken from his, he's a little agitated. His mother likes to say that when he gets this way, the Grumpy Monster in his tummy is feeling a little more alive than normal and is kicking stuff around. This is okay, Dillon tends to think, because he rather enjoys kicking stuff around.

Still stretching, the rare sunlight on a drizzly day streaming through the curtains, he can't but help express his disappointment as he looks about at the various antiques and stupid, fake gold ornaments decorating the room. He puffs his cheeks. All of this means he's not only still at his boring old grandmother's house, but still in the same room as her even older, and vastly more boring, father... who's still sitting in the exact same sofa-chair and in the exact same position as Dillon last remembers him.

The hospice nurse left before his nap, and so the room has the fresh smells of latex, disinfectants, medications, and a variety of medical creams. All-in-all there is an aroma of sterility. This is a good thing, since it means he won't need to smear deodorant on his granddaddies clothes to mask the mouth ball stench again.

He's sitting on the floor kicking the table for no more reason than to kick the table when he hears his grandmother laughing and talking in the next room over. "Sounds like he just woke up," she says, and then peeks her old, wrinkly face into the room. She's on the phone and she smiles and waves before ducking back out and saying, "Yeah, he sure does, doesn't he?"

"Does what?" Dillon mutters to himself. "Better not be sayin' I does want to stay, 'cause I doesn't." He sticks his tongue out towards the door and gets up and says to his great granddaddy, "Wanna play Robo Rex-lers?"

He's waiting for a response, observing blotches and scabs and little purple veins on the balding head of the old man, when he realizes he's still asleep. However, his granddaddy's dull, blue eyes are actually open and Dillon giggles with excitement after noticing his mistake.

"Granddaddy, granddaddy," he says, "Play with me." He scurries away to get a wrestling action figure and a robot Tyrannosaurus-Rex.

"Let's play Robo Rex-lers, ok? You can be Robo Rex this time." He bashes them together, enthralled by the imaginary hatred within these two plastic toys, and roars and shouts out all the sound effects with equal emphasis. A few minutes of this, combined with the silence of the hardly used television, the blank stares of the somehow never dusty porcelain dolls, and the tic-tic of the clock on the wall, and Dillon realizes his not so great granddaddy hasn't joined in to play yet.

"Granddaddy," he says, getting up and turning to him. Amidst all the clean smells there's another, odder, smell. He looks at the catheter tube trailing

from under his granddaddy's quilt and follows it, hoping with a boyish interest to see a flow of yellow. But the bag dangling on the stand next to him is empty. He says, "Ain't you gonna play?" and waits for an answer that he doesn't get.

Annoyed, he stares at the batty geezer who stares back. "Ah," Dillon says, "you wanna play that game. Okay, fine. But if you blink first you gotta play Robo Rex-lers with me."

He puts on his most serious face, but it seems this time that his granddaddy is determined to win, or at least serious about looking at the wall. Dillon disregards this and centers himself in his granddaddy's line of sight and stares and stares; his eyes begin quivering and blurring with fatigue, and finally he can't help but be the first to blink. Anger boils in him. He doesn't like to lose, normally never does, and although he knows people sometimes let him win, he still thinks that better than losing. No one likes to lose. No one likes to lose nothin', he thinks.

He sits Indian style on the floor with his arms folded across his chest and sulks. He's waiting for his granddaddy to calm him, which normally means a shaky pat on the head and nothing more. Strangely, his granddaddy doesn't seem to care, and this upsets him further.

"You're bein' mean," he says, getting up and clicking on the television. He flips four times before being back at the very same snowy channel, which, you guessed it, upsets him.

"Why ain't you guys got no good channels?" he says, and once again to no response. He throws the two toys down and Robo-Rex's head breaks off against the TV stand. "You ain't playin' fair and if you don't play fair, I ain't playin' at all."

He knows he's being naughty, but he doesn't care. As far as he's concerned, his granddaddy's cheating by just sitting there looking with that mindless expression. For no more reason than to be mischievous, he leans in closer and whistles into his granddaddy's good ear as if getting a parrot's attention.

Puffing his cheeks yet again, he says, "I don't wanna play the silent game neither." He says a few other random things, pokes out his tongue, makes finger glasses, and scrunches his face into the ugliest expression he can manage until finally he realizes he'll have to dig deep into his bag of tricks. He takes a step away so he can't be swatted by his granddaddy's cane, and then instead, feeling like he's done the smartest thing ever, he snatches the cane up and swirls it teasingly like a baton before saying, "Got your shit stick."

He's out of reach, but he still flinches from the expected repercussions which don't come.

Dillon, with his head tilted in confusion, is standing about three feet away looking at his Granddaddy, sensing, but not exactly understanding, that something isn't right.

His Grandmother's voice breaks his focus. "Your mother's here to take you home," she says, coming in from the kitchen and setting the cordless phone on the television. "Kiss your Granddaddy bye-bye, dear."

Dillon does so, not because he cares anymore about saying bye but because he knows the old fart can't continue being such a jerk in front of other adults. But he's wrong. His granddaddy is still playing the don't blink game. He's still playing the silent treatment game. For once, Dillon wishes he'd play the re-

peat everything said game, but he doesn't play this either.

More anger is building in him. He's shaking, furious he's not only losing but that he's being picked on and embarrassed in front of his mother and grandmother. His throat starts to tighten. His tensed jaws tremble. Tears blur his vision and though, instinctually almost, he knows better than to misbehave, he can't help it. "You's not bein' fun," he screams, to which the only responses are gasps of surprise from the woman in the room. "I hate it here, and you's," his voice falters, "you's a stupid, stupid ol' man."

No one makes a move or reprimands him. He sees both his mother and his grandmother frozen in place, both clenching their hands and then releasing. Clenching and releasing. Both would look identical if not for the years separating them. He must have really screwed up, he thinks, but then he notices they aren't looking at him, they're looking at his granddaddy, unaware apparently that Dillon's Grumpy Monster is alive again and wrecking havoc.

He can't take it. The tears flow freely and he storms out then, surprised further that his mother doesn't even snatch him up and spank his butt as he pushes past her. It isn't until a moment later when she finds him in a closet and embraces him in a hug with tears in her eyes that he feels regret for his behavior.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," she says, and repeatedly kisses him all over the top of his head. "Nothing about what you saw was your fault. Okay? Do you understand that?" She braces him by his shoulders and looks him squarely in his eyes. "Don't blame yourself, it wasn't your fault. It was his time and he's... he's in a better place now. He's happy. It's a happy place with happy things."

Dillon's relieved he's not in trouble, but annoyed he didn't get to go to the happy place with his granddaddy. He better not be at Chuck E. Cheese, he thinks. His mother's still crying so he tells her he'll go apologize, this however, for reasons he doesn't know, makes her sob all the harder.

A moment later when he returns to the living room he sees that his granddaddy hasn't left to have fun yet, and excitement overcomes him. He's just about to go in and ask him if he can go to wherever the "better place" his mother was talking about is, but his grandmother reaches out and closes his granddaddy's eyes before he gets a chance.

At once, he feels his Grumpy Monster start to kick things around but he manages to turn and stomp away unnoticed. It's always naptime for him, he thinks. All he ever does is sleep, sleep, sleep.

At Seventeen

1

Another friday night in Dave's basement.
If it weren't for this basement I'd
never get drunk and I deserve to get drunk
and laid. All-boys Catholic high school
isn't knuckle-rapping nuns anymore, but
it's unnatural and I have to feel angst
right? or I'm not doing my job.

2

I can't help thinking I've made a mistake
dropping Jamie for Isabella and ending
up with Alice. 21st century and she's still
gung-ho for God, it will get in the way, but
for now when that summer dress comes off
Jesus Christ.

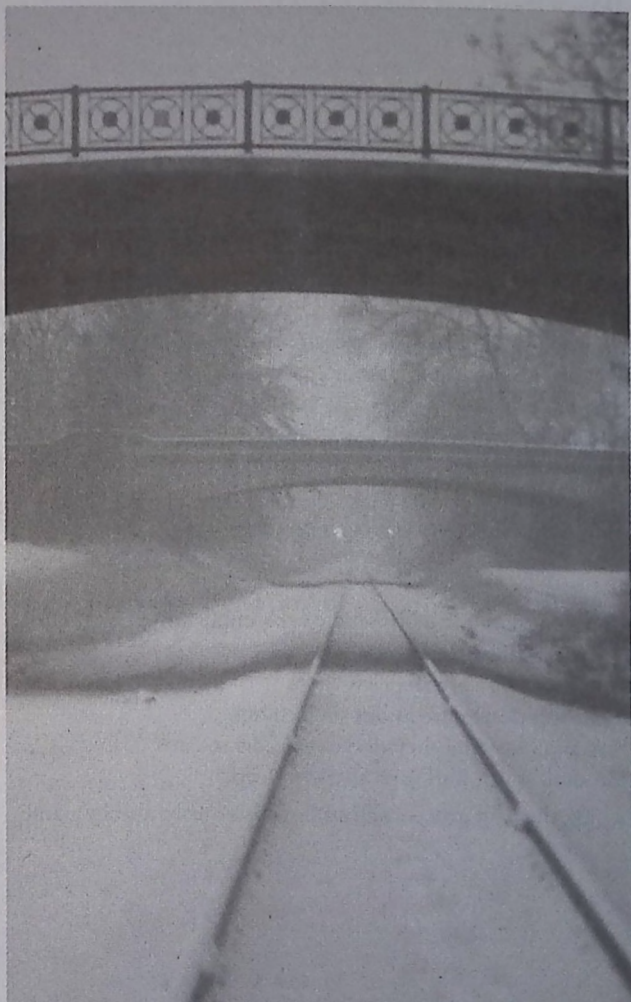
3

And Saturday morning I wake up at 6
and splash my face. Because I'm like a
second son, Kathy and David make it clear
that I'm to help myself to breakfast before
I head to the yard, load cement blocks, and
sweat rum in the swelter.

In Winter

the pod-whiskered
redbud bares ice skin

as snow soars
indiscernibly down or up.



Untitled by Tina Fanetti

You and Your Father

Talk over the chittering tin
Above your heads.
The rain has done you a favor:
For all this afternoon,
You two shall talk.

Be thankful. Speak.
Do not brood away this
Rare, wet blessing:

You two shall talk of the mist that lades the air
In the high places:
Your father shall say
That he despises the mist.
You shall say that the mist and you are like two brothers.
He shall laugh and sigh,
While the rain speaks at length on the topic of nothing.

You two shall talk of the coldness of the valley at dawn,
Where the sun comes late:
He shall say
That it is bidden, the way of things.
You shall find no warmth in this answer.
He shall smile and hum,
While the rain gives a speech on dialectics.

You two shall talk of the full river's implications for the fish,
Who pile toward new water:
He shall say
That fish don't care about such things.
You shall say that they don't yet know to care.
He shall smile, and turn away to sleep.
While the rain greets each stone boisterously, and by name.

The Last Hors d'Oeuvre

No one ate the last hors d'oeuvre
And so it lay there pining:
Oh the deepest joy I'd know
To coat some stomach's lining.

The night progressed in due accord
For the lonely mini-quiche.
He spit and swore at dukes and lords
And all his voice could reach:
Pick me up, you tasteless fops!
You plebian rejects!
Cultivate some class you fools,
You apes with tongue defects!

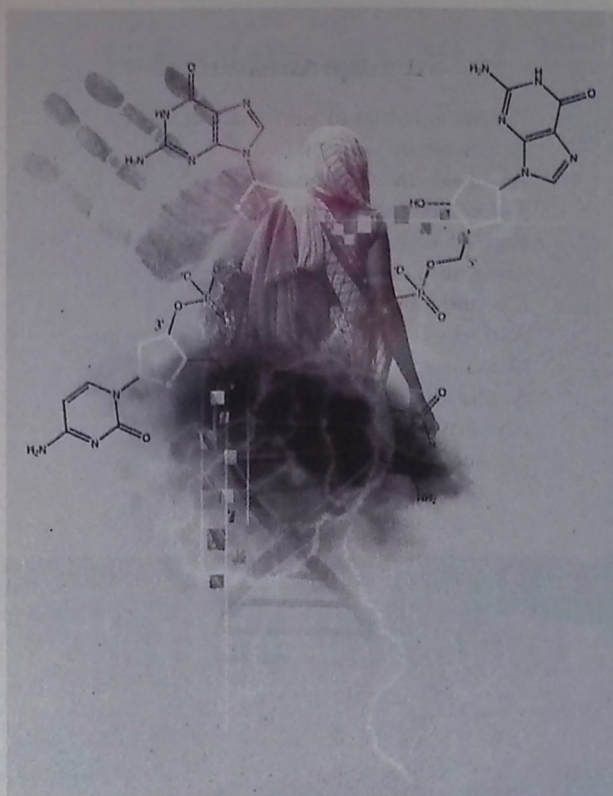
A man of girth and noble birth
Alighted from his chair.
He hobbled up with humble steps
And from ruddy lips declared!
Alas poor lonely luscious morsel,
You tempt me toward excess!
But all in all, what's one bite?
One tid-bit more or less?

Oh no no no! You portly toad!
(The appetizer mewled)
I overheard your plaintive snorts
Likening me to gruel!

Strange Cathedral

Incantations of sinnerhood
endlessly weep
inside the God-box
where floor to ceiling windows
failed
transparency
and a sanctimonious
man
chanted prayers
for the sinful
and unclean faithful—
seated in red velvet pews,
heads held low—
while he remained
the ordained
servant of the word,
his holiness
the unrepentant
fraud.

Offering the weakness
of communion wine,
pounding
the pulpit
in fractured Sunday morning
stained-glass
sunlight,
blinding the flock
with pristine
robes of white and gold,
behind him a cross
too immense for Christ
but insufficient
to bear his
own transgressions.



Building Blocks by Marquis Love

Surely baptisms
remain
incomplete
in the hands
of a man who
indulged
on bedsheets
woven from altar cloths,
and rested his Godhead
upon satin pillowcases
bought with tithes
from their husbands.

And where does that leave us, God,
Where does that leave us?

Samuel

We are the songs they write about us
As you are of pop and pomp
And I am circumstantial rock.
Me so bitter and graceless,
Faceless with a thousand faces,
And you are the same four chords,
Overused and tasteless—
And why should I grow and change my life
When you're so bent to take it?
As you are pomp and circumstance
And I'm meticulous and bland—
Just a man.



Participate by Angeles Jonske

All Hands Bury The Dead

Your Navy dog tag
is the last article
I remove from your body.

When I pick it up,
it catches the light
coming through the chapel's
stained-glass windows.

But when I put it in my pocket,
close my hand around it,
it is cold.

If I take your hand,
the stone floor
beneath my feet
will turn to water.

I place my palm
atop your head
where they allowed you
a whisper of hair.
It is singed wheat
between my fingers.

My gaze falls.
All the shades of blue
lived within your eyes.

You took
the world
with you.

The Uncannies

By Ryan Krull

We come early to brew the coffee and set up the chairs. Two of our younger members carry the podium downstairs from the chapel on the first floor. Someone always brings donuts or day-old bagels with cream cheese, cookies at the very least. Tonight it's just cookies. After the room is arranged we sit down quietly and think about what we might want to say or if we just want to listen tonight. At seven sharp, as always, we begin.

Three quarters of the way through the serenity prayer, the door squeaks open and an older incarnation of someone we used to know comes in out of the rain.

"Just when you think you've got this thing licked," Frank says gruffly, not addressing any specific person. Frank is considered by many of us to be one of our program's greatest success stories, though now given his disheveled appearance it is likely he has reverted back to more of a work in progress. Even with the distraught expression we are certain it is him. His long, Southern California, blond hair makes him recognizable. But it's the cumulative effect of his features—light blue eyes and neat eyebrows coupling with just the right amount of baby fat—that make him almost one-of-a-kind.

"Podium's open," Lisa, one of our few female regulars, says to Frank still standing near the doorway. "We're looking for someone to start us off."

Frank nods, inquisitively eyeing the brown turban-esque fabric Lisa wears to cover her platinum blonde hair, and makes his way through the group to the podium. His shoes leave squeaks and puddles in their wake. The final fourth of the serenity prayer goes unsaid for now.

"Everybody is always asking if I watch the show *Shitty Grins*," Frank starts before he has even settled on the dais. "—The girls serving drinks behind the bar, the guys standing next to me in the pisser. 'You look just like that character De-Witt,' everyone says with such enthusiasm, as if interacting with a man attached to fame by the thinnest of threads was really something."

Frank's upper body rocks slowly side to side as he talks. His arms are crossed sort of like a pretzel and he re-tucks his hands under his biceps every couple seconds.

"But I'm too smart to be cynical about it. That bartender might actually give up her number and that guy from the john more times than not buys a round. And I'm just trying to make the best of it. I've been stuck going to these dive bars and shitty clubs for years now, supporting my roommate Stanley G's ever-fledgling rap career. Being his number one fan was a chore, a real chore, that is before *Shitty Grins* became a bona fide hit in its third season."

We haven't seen Stanley Gucci since he dragged Frank into his first meeting ten or twelve or however many years ago. "Do what you do," Stan told us, helping an empty-eyed Frank over to a chair in the back of the room that was basically the same then as it is now. "No harm left to be done to the poor guy

anyway." A lot of us had friends say things like that at one time or another.

"Stanley'd rap his ass off," Frank continued from the podium, looking neither like the shapeless soul we first met nor the happy and healthy success story we eventually respected, "coming up with rhymes like *'My bitch got a big ass like Oprah/But she bend like Deepak Chopra.'* Though only a handful of people made it out to Luna or ByGeorge's or wherever he was playing. And fewer still are bumping their heads and snickering to Stan's clever rhymes. Most of the little crowd has found its way to the back of the club. Because you know who's at the back of the club?"

We all know.

"I am," says Frank, digging his thumb into his breastbone. "You must get so much pussy just for looking like him," Frank says in high pitched, mocking voice, "kids with Greek letters on their t-shirts always say shit like that to me yelling over my roommate's music. And I know exactly how to respond but I gotta make it sound spontaneous. 'I've been with a lot of women, two of them quite attractive,' I always say with almost no variation, just mimicking DeWitt's self-deprecating wit. The co-eds around the table laugh. They always laugh, even though I have no timing and usually fuck up the phrasing. It's not like the real DeWitt is there to upstage anyone. A real DeWitt doesn't exist. He's approaching his five minutes and he's acting like he's just getting started; one of us is going to have to say something soon.

"But DeWitt Wayne," Frank pauses, perhaps waiting to be called by the group to yield the podium. We stay quiet; Frank hasn't been here in years after all. He unfolds his arms and grasps both sides of the podium. He is wearing black gloves.

"But DeWitt Wayne does exist all right, albeit only in an abstract manner played by C-list actor Michael Pitt on Sunday nights from nine to nine-thirty on premium cable. DeWitt was real enough. DeWitt was manufactured to be two things: A role-model to the large chunk of the Gen-Xers who refused to settle down, and a well of vicarious freedom for all the ones who did."

We're pretty sure he got that last bit from TV Guide or Entertainment Weekly.

"That's what he was manufactured to do, and I guess he did a good enough job. But he did an even better job totally fucking up my life. Was he manufactured to do that? Was he?"

Frank delivers these existential questions to us in a manner approaching a yell, making the group uncomfortable.

"Those fucking hacks choose Mike fucking Pitt who just happens to look just like me and I know the third step, I know the third step: releasing all blame towards the actors, actresses and incidental individuals who, by no fault of their own, bear the uncanny resemblances which have negatively affected our lives."

He just mumbled through the third step—the step many in our program believe to be the most important, the most releasing, the most cathartic—so quickly it's insulting to the entire group. We must request he leave the podium and allow another to speak as per the "five consecutive minute" rule.

Frank slumps off the speaking platform back down to sit with the rest of us. Jason, who has been with us for many years, takes Frank's place on the dais.

"I don't need to tell you who I look like," Jason says. We love Jason; he's

been great for the group. "Unfortunately, I don't seem to have to tell anyone else either."

Jason's always a little nervous when he gets up to the podium, but it just makes the rest of us feel less nervous when we get up there.

"I mean, it started out great. I thought I had hit a gold mine, struck a jackpot," he says, his arms relaxed, his hands tentatively resting in his khaki pockets. "I pretty much doubled my income doing parties, retirements mostly. It was great to make other people smile; they'd always play that music with the horns whenever I came in—went as far as Oklahoma City to do a retirement party; they paid my airfare, hotel room and everything—was on the news a few times, just local fluff pieces on all the big affiliates. After each one aired I would always hear from someone I went to high school with or an ex-girlfriend or something, just calling to say they saw me on TV."

Jason takes one of his hands out of his khakis and runs them through his hair; a lot of us do this when we get to the point in our story when things take a turn for the worse.

"Then a reporter calls me and wants to do an interview. She works for a national rag. I'm naïve I guess. I mean all the local people had been so nice, from channels 2, 4, 5 and the others. But man, this woman, now I'm not blaming her, it was my own fault, but wow she really had it in for me—made me look bad. I remember the headline: *Thousands Dead in Two Phony Wars and a Mismanaged Flood while this Man Gets Rich Playing Dress Up*. It's a mouthful, but boy some people round here, some of the youngsters especially, really took it to heart. I'd get recognized so easily, but not like I used to. It wasn't like 'hey you look a lot like him' anymore. It had turned into, 'you're that guy who won't give any of his money to charity' or 'you're getting rich off a war criminal.' Man, if only I had got rich I would have given some to charity, shit I would have started my own. But every penny I made went to putting two of my kids through their undergrad and one after that through Law School. Do I regret it? No. Has it been tough? You bet. But I don't need to tell you that, you all know how tough it gets. But I tell ya, just when I thought it couldn't get any harder, the shoes came. Now they just throw shoes at me."

Jason looks down at his own shoes as he trails off, probably collecting his thoughts or maybe he is half expecting one of us to throw one of our shoes at him. We would never do that.

We nod our heads and smile wide so Jason can see. He smiles unconvincingly back.

"Well, my five is almost up," he says. "There's not much more I could say about it today anyway."

Before Jason has stepped down Frank is all ready back up to the speaker's position. It's sort of an unwritten rule that no one 'double dips,' as we call it, until everyone who wants one has had a turn up there. Though at our meetings, it is only the written rules that are enforced.

"And around this time Stan's career is actually starting to take off too," Frank says, "and he's playing shows almost every night. This is probably what? Four years ago. Looking back, honestly I don't know. Maybe I didn't have to go out to whatever bar or club Stanley G performed at every night. I think some-

times Stan didn't really want me out there actually. A lot of nights I just convinced myself I wanted to be someone a little more than Frank, even if it meant being a little less than DeWitt or Michael Pitt. 'One last time,' I must have told myself on dozens of occasions."

Frank bites his bottom lip and furrows his brow, most likely remembering something he isn't going to talk about. His features relax when he says, "It's rough when your best you is mostly someone else." To that we want to shout amen or have it ironed on a t-shirt in big block letters.

"But everyone knows *Shitty Grin*'s ratings are going down anyway," Frank goes on, returning to his story. "All the entertainment shows and blogs are talking about it. So they start making DeWitt do crazy things to get people to tune in. I remember one time seeing a preview that said, 'Tune in this Sunday when DeWitt takes ecstasy.' I remember thinking that maybe this is the ticket because, who's kidding, I haven't been getting as many free drinks or hot chicks' numbers. I've actually been reduced to making people guess who I look like and when I tell them they just get this look and cock their heads like a confused dog and ask if that show is still even on."

"Anyway... The ecstasy episode is all right, above par for sure, and as soon as it's over I get a bunch of texts from people wanting to know if I want any E; most of them refer to me as DeWitt in their texts. So of course I say, 'Sure, why not?' and the weeks following the ecstasy episode were pretty good times and I danced a lot, but then they had DeWitt smoking crack and meth and turned him into a full-blown alcoholic. It's ridiculous really," Frank says with the faintest smirk. "And Michael Pitt tells his friends in private that he suffers for his art."

Frank stops talking and his cheeks puff up while he gives a long, conspicuous exhale. His eyes get wide for a moment; he runs his hands through his hair. How does Frank know what the actor says in private? We wonder.

"And that's when things start getting shitty," he says. "It's probably a month that goes by, maybe six weeks, beginning with the ecstasy episode. All of it a total blur really. I'm not entirely sure how I arrive where I do but I know I am there. I vaguely remember lying next to the woman, peacefully, with my hand on her thigh, spooning you might say. But I think I may have just invented that image, conjured it up later that night when I was on my back in jail, trying to stitch together how I had gotten there."

Frank pauses for a moment, collects his thoughts. He has our full attention. Years ago when he was a regular this was the part of his story he glossed over, nearly refused to talk about. A lot of us have those parts of our lives, we say they're too painful to talk about, but that's just a euphemism. They are simply too embarrassing.

"But I do remember vividly her quickly waking up, trying to jump out of the bed but I'm pinning her down and covering her eyes and she, like me, umm we are either high on crack or coming down off a serious crack high. 'What do I look like?' I ask her. I scream the question at her again and again and she's writhing under me, not knowing what the fuck she just woke up to. 'What do I look like? What do I look like?' 'You look like DeWitt, like fucking DeWitt,' she gasps for air and I remember her raspy voice and thinking her mouth must be dry as shit. She reaches out at her nightstand for a water bottle or maybe her cell phone

or pipe I don't know: I think I had cashed her stash hours ago after she passed out. 'Fucking describe my face,' I say again. Spitule and blood flies out with the words and lands on her face. She says something like, 'You have pale hair and blonde stubble, you're skinny and eyebrows and...fuck, what's going on?'"

"'You're describing DeWitt from TV you cunt' I say to her. 'Describe me!' I must have yelled that last bit really loud because I read about it in the police report, the cops heard it from outside the house."

Frank allows himself a reflective pause; we think he must be done. We all remember where his story goes from there: assault charges, lawsuits, stint in jail, coming into our program as a condition of his early release filled with hatred and blame which over time turned into healing and breakthroughs. Then he disappeared and we don't see him until tonight. All things considered, we've got to say he's looking pretty good—disheveled at the moment, but no apparent permanent damage. He'd probably clean up just fine.

Standing behind the podium in silence, Frank's expression has gone from one full of reflection to appearing bewildered at himself, speechless. He doesn't see Jim Styles smoothly slide out of his chair and up onto the speaking platform.

"I think this five minutes is about up, Frank," Jim says. "Why don't you let someone else talk for five and then you can come back up here and have another." Frank doesn't respond; he looks like he is biting down on his cheek. Conflict is rare within our group. Most of us have scooted to the edges of our steel folding chairs. None of us should be too worried though, not with Jim up there.

Jim is sort of the unofficial leader of our little group. He's been here so long that most people under sixty don't even notice who he looks like. He doesn't even tell his story anymore. But whenever someone gets upset, Jim's the one there to talk them down. After a few more seconds of silence, he pats Frank on the back and the final pat turns into a weak push, just enough to get Frank to capitulate. But Frank stays on the dais, wanders off to the side and sits down on the floor Indian style. His expression is less nuanced, his jaw is clenched and eyes wide open. He rocks back and forth. Jim takes in Frank's behavior with the rest of us then continues.

"Well, who's next tonight?" Jim says. "Anybody? Cheryl? Lisa?"

We stay seated and silent, stealing glances at Frank, trying not to stare.

"Sure, I'll go," Lisa says, tentatively getting up from her chair.

"Instead of just cowering into these church basements and *talking*," Franks says, stopping Lisa before she can make it to the dais. "Why don't we go out and do something about these celebrity assholes?"

"Frank," Lisa stammers, trying to stay composed, "you know that part D of rule three forbids you to interrupt except..."

"Oh go fuck a Kennedy," Frank says, laughing cruelly. "You're not fooling anyone with that piece of carpet of your head."

"What the hell happened to you?" Lisa asks.

"Oh just sit down and shut up," is his reply. She sits down, muttering "asshole."

"You see," Frank says, gesturing towards Lisa, "you people never stand your fucking ground. That's how you end up swept into these shitty little basements. Your whole program is a how-to guide in being a pussy, your laws forbid

you to organize in any meaningful way.”

“The whole idea of our program,” Jim responds sternly, “is that it helps only the people who come into these rooms and doesn’t affect anyone else.” He is clearly addressing Frank although he is looking back at us. “A lot of people look like each other. If one of them gets famous, it isn’t their fault the other pays a price.”

“Well it’s about time they pay the fucking price,” Frank says, stepping down off the podium and positioning himself halfway between the group and the exit. “In a few hours it will be all over the news folks. By tomorrow morning the streets of Beverly Hills will be soaked in blood.”

And with that he leaves, disappearing into sheets of heavy rain.

The door squeaks shut on a dumbfounded room. Nothing like this has ever happened in our group. We pride ourselves on structure and regularity, but even the program handbook lacks the appropriate script for dealing with what just occurred.

“He’s going to kill Michael Pitt,” Jim says, finally.

“Does Michael Pitt even live in this city?” Jason asks.

“I don’t have a clue,” says Jim, “but Frank seemed pretty sure of himself. Someone should call the police.”

“On it,” Jason says, his phone to his ear.

Before Jason can say anything to the operator, Lisa grabs his cell and presses the red disconnect button. “That would be a violation,” she said. “He or she who enters into and opens up in these rooms can do so in confidentiality and with confidence that all things said within the context of a meeting will never under any circumstances be used or repeated by any other member outside of the program. Rule 2, Part A. I think that’s pretty much verbatim.”

“Whoa c’mon now,” Jason says. “Let’s be...”

“She’s right,” Jim cuts him off. “Frank’s long gone by now anyway. And besides, if we call the police then Frank’s linked to the program and it does us a whole lotta harm.”

Weeks go by and we wait for the news, for the blowback, for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. He wasn’t an A-lister but if he died here it would at least be a scandal in town. And what about Frank? Where did that guy go? We spend the beginning of every meeting scanning the obits, but a celebrity’s death isn’t the type of information we should have to search for. Nonetheless it consumes us; coffee stops getting made, no one brings donuts.

Then, a few weeks after the ordeal, Frank’s roommate Stanley shows up at our meeting.

“Any of ya’ll seen Frank?” he asks, standing just a few steps in the doorway.

We tell him it’s been several weeks and that he seemed distraught.

“And before that one time it was a couple years,” Jim adds.

“Well I ain’t seen him neither. If you do, tell him he can have this back,”

Stanley sets a brown grocery bag down next to his Timberlands.

“What is it?” we ask.

“Something I don’t need. My pop always said never owe anything to an

asshole. I just got signed and am moving to L.A. anyway. There's somethin' in there addressed to y'all too." Stan turns towards the door but stops his hand just shot of the knob. "And if Frank don't show up, y'all can keep it. I know you do some good. For the brief period in Frank's life when he wasn't a piece of shit, it was cause of ya'll."

No one wants to ask him what's in the bag.

"Aight," He says, then leaves.

"Cash," Jim says as he peers into the bag. "A lot of it. It must be thousands."

"Is it Michael Pitt's?" one of us asks.

Jim pulls out stack after stack of hundreds, wrapped tightly in rubber bands and passes them around until we are all holding one, feeling their weight, smelling the money's odor; and there are still several more in the bag.

"Well I know there's nothing in the rules for something like this," Jim says.

"We could give it to charity," Jason says. "Something we could all agree on like I don't know, AIDS in Africa, Make a Wish."

"There's a piece of paper attached to this one, a note," Lisa says.

With a light blue 'While You Were Out' across the top, written in black pen:

Buddy,

Sorry for all the times I was an asshole. Especially that time I was tweaking and scared your dog into running away. I hope JayBird found her way back. Also, sorry for all those times when we were living together when I pissed in places other than the bathroom.

Those were rough times.

But it's all worked out and my ship has come in. I'm giving you twenty thousand dollars. Let's call it me paying the asshole tax, to help me sleep better at night. Righting wrongs the easy way.

Frank

"There's an envelope in the bag too," Lisa says.

"Who's it addressed to?" Jim asks

"The Uncannies," she says.

The note is written on same 'While You Were Out' heading, in the same black pen:

Fellow Travelers,

As you all know, the program healed me, saved me from a special kind of hate that came from deep within and did the most damage at its point of origin. I treated the group like a hospital. I got better then left. After I left, as many of you undoubtedly feared I would, I got sick again. The hate came back, this time stronger. I was determined to make You-Know-Who pay for my addictions, my behavior, my evil

In my despair, though, I ignored the third rule. I went as far as to track down You-Know-Who, stalk him, and one night in a Holiday Inn in Buffalo, I had him quite literally cornered and in my sights. He was afraid, though not as much as I had hoped. He asked me why I was doing this and I told him the story you have all heard many years ago many times. He offered me a hundred thousand dollars for the film rights to make a movie about my life, said it

was the role he was born to play. I spent the two days in that hotel with him, telling him everything about me. I hate to say it, but a 100K makes me open up a lot more than the idea of being healed ever did. The group and the program fascinated him. He said he might drop by as Frank Reardon to help him get into character; I figured you all deserved a heads up.

As for me, I'm using what I got left of Pitt's money and moving to Debordia, a strip of land in the Caribbean sandwiched between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It's my understanding they have no word for pop culture and they certainly get by without celebrities. Maybe some of you all might want to join me some day. I'm told a little U.S. currency goes a long way down there.

Your often wayward brother,
Frank Reardon

We return to a new normal and Frank Reardon once again becomes a figment of the past, another of the groups' many success stories. We don't talk about it when Michael Pitt begins a media blitz promoting his feature film *The Fame Monster* and the particulars of how he prepared to play his doppelganger create a minor buzz. None of us acknowledge it when we watch him say to Oprah, "When I was able to fool the guy's own support group I knew I was finally ready to play the part." The Monday after his film bombs in its opening weekend we still don't talk about it, but someone just happens to bring in a real fine assortment of top shelf pastries.

"What's the occasion?" one of us asks, with a smirk, looking over the sugary selections next to the coffee.

"Haven't the faintest," another says.

But of course we all know. And we all wish we could tell Frank.

After the meeting we stuff the front page of the latest *Variety* (headlined "Pitt's New Film Ambitiously Bad") into an empty wine bottle and throw it into the river.

"All rivers make it to the ocean," Jim says.

For a few minutes we stand around watching our bottle as it falls in behind a rusty trash-barge swarming with giant grey birds. We imagine the barge leading our message to the ocean, then the waves carrying it to a distant shore. The message will wait inconspicuously in the sand for Frank, who is no longer uncanny, no longer anything but himself.

It takes a few weeks but we finally decide what to do with the money. We take it to a park and burn it all in one of those rusted barbeque pits. The bills singe on every side just before they curl up and disappear into ash. When the heap of hundreds is finally just a pile of ash, we know that Frank Reardon's story is over. There will never be a reason for anyone to tell it again.

Author & Artist Biographies

A.R. CURRY, who prefers to simply be called Curry, though he'll answer to Dr. or King Curry, is a senior and a father of two beautiful children. **TINA FANETTI** is finishing her PhD in Education and expects to graduate in August 2011. Her hobbies include astronomy, quilting, basset hounds and photography. **CHRISTINA FRANCE** is a continuing ed. student. She earned a master's in teaching from Lindenwood. She teaches high school English and enjoys hiking. **JENNIFER GOLDRING** takes creative writing classes and will be a graduate student this fall. She is a transplant from the Arizona desert and enjoys hiking, biking and humid summers. **ANGELES JONSKE** is a junior studying Studio Art. She loves everything random and has read "Perks Of Being A Wallflower" eleven times as of today. She loves to eat ice cream in her spare time. **RYAN KRULL** wrote "The Uncannies" for John Dalton's undergraduate fiction workshop. He would like to thank Professor Dalton and everyone in class who helped make the story better. **MARQUIS LOVE** is a freshman studying Graphic Design. His favorite pastimes are drawing, digital art and doing creative things with friends. **THOMAS MANION** is uncomfortable divulging personal information to strangers. So, if you see him around campus, introduce yourself. **BOBBY MEILE** is a Master's student in Biology. He wants to be a Master's student IN SPACE! at Space UMSL, but the world has not caught up with that dream. **JORDAN PROTT** is graduating in May with a Bachelor's in English and Creative Writing Certificate. He wants to thank UMSL, his friends, and his family. **SUMMER QABAZARD** was raised in Kuwait and is currently finishing her MA in English. **ROB TEDRICK** is a junior in Secondary Education as well as a poet and one stylish individual. **AMANDA WELLS** is a student in pursuit of having an office frequented by students who bring coffee and conversation. **TIMOTHY YOUNG** fears nothing, except a blank page and an empty bottle.



Lilypad by Jennifer Goldring